Voters don't want lectures on morality

MARIANNE MEANS

Congressional Republicans are discovering that pious lectures about declining public moral values do not sell well among voters who consider themselves independent or undecided.

The problem is that people are not inclined to look on politicians as paragons of virtue who know best how others should behave in private life. Preachers belong in churches, not in legislatures.

The House GOP leadership made a political mistake recently by capitulating to pressure from the religious right, which demanded that the party devote more attention to a moral crusade against homosexuality, abortion and other conservative social causes. The religious right exerts so much influence now over the GOP that conservative lawmakers rushed to denounce gays and push for new gay-bashing and anti-abortion measures.

But the political backlash was swift, demonstrating that many Americans are more tolerant of homosexuality and personal privacy freedoms than religious conservatives are. A new poll by the Republican Leadership Council, a group of GOP moderates, confirms the findings of previous surveys that so-called moral issues turn off independent and undecided voters.

Only 20 percent of registered independents and swing voters approved of the party's opposition to gay rights and abortion in all circumstances.

A CNN poll in early July said 59 percent of Americans disapprove of active homosexuality. But that does not mean most voters would endorse efforts to discriminate against gays and lesbians or would support politicians who arrogantly pass judgment on other individuals' private lives.

Consesvative Republicans have been persistent in their efforts to chip away at the legality of abortion, trying to slip inventive restrictions into unrelated legislation at every opportunity. But the issue of gay rights has been relatively dormant until recently, when re5/8igious right leaders threatened to turn their backs on the GOP if its officials did not give a higher priority to their agenda.

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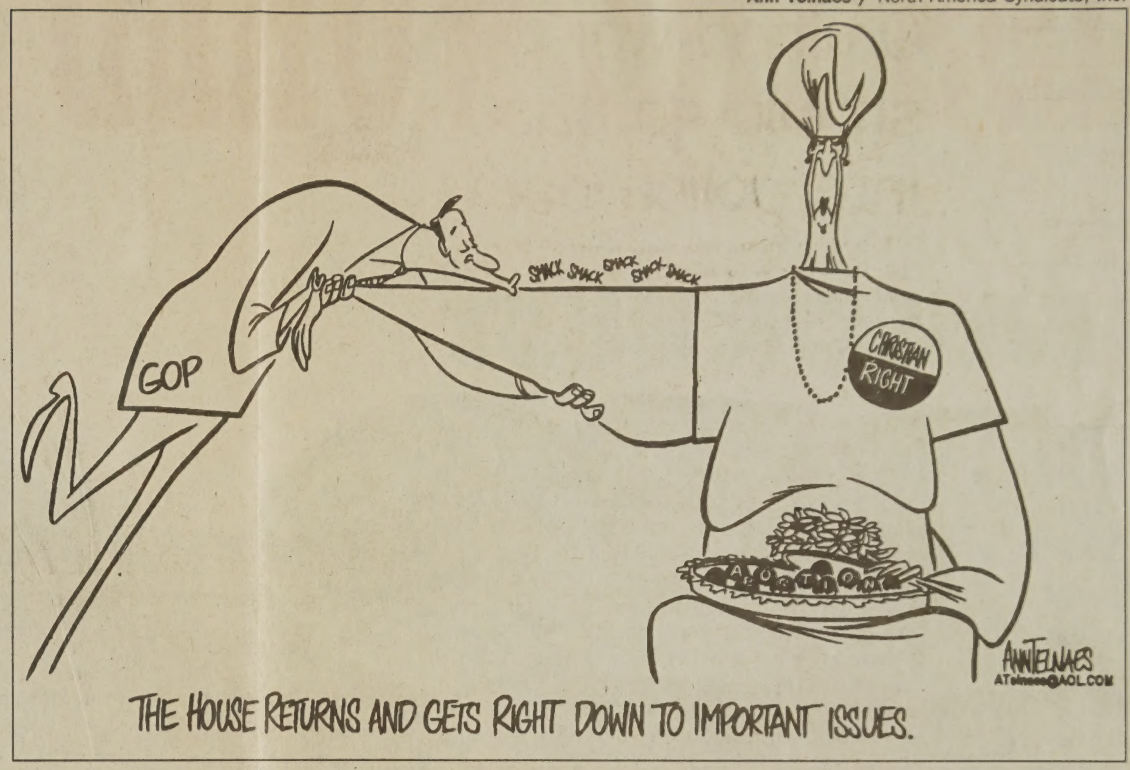

The religious right was upset that GOP leaders had not protested immediately when President Clinton issued an executive order in May to assure equal opportunities for gay federal employees.

After the threat, Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott, R-Miss, jumped in with both feet. He attackdd homosexuals as sinful and compared them to kleptomaniacs, sex addicts or alcoholics who indulge in bad behavior that they should be able to control. He also vowed not to allow a Senate vote this year on the nomination of James Hormel to be U.S. ambassador to Luxembourg. Hormel would have been the nation's first openly gay ambassador if confirmed.

This official ratification of its views in turn encouraged the Christian Coalition to take out full-page advertisements in major newspapers across the country contending that homosexuality is voluntary, self-destructive behavior that can be cured by faith in God. The ad urges gays to "recognize their sin and repent."

The ads' assertion is contrary to majority scientific opinion, which does not view homosexuality as an illness to be easily remedied by merely finding God and changing one's ways. There is no real consensus as to the cause of homosexuality, but many experts believe it has a genetic basis over which a person has little control.

The ads' underlying purpose seemed to be to frame a new political crusade that would seek this fall to label any candidate who defended gay rights as immoral and approving of sin.

The Human Rights Campaign, the nation's largest gay rights group, countered with its own commercials attacking the religious right as mistaken and prejudiced. The ads say, "Some in this country are selling a myth that gay Americans are not people of faith ... they are those who want to claim God and the Bible for their own narrow vision of this nation."

President Clinton's press secretary, Mike McCurry, noting the sudden re-emergence of homosexuality as an issue, said, "I don't know whether Republicans think gay-bashing is good politics. There are some who apparently act like they believe it."

Currently, congressional Republicans are divided about whether picking on gays is good politics. They must ultimately choose between appealing to mainstream voters they need to lure into their party and pandering to a narrow group they already have.

It is exclusive politics versus ynclusive politics, and the answer should be clear that attracting more voters is better than attracting fewer. In any case, it is wrong to be mean-spirited about gay rights. Homosexuals have a right to be treated fairly like anyone else, and their private sexual preference is none of our business.

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